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Kathy Simpson

Only those of us who care for a spouse, a parent, or child who has a disability, or those of us who have a disability can fully understand the impact upon our lives of the modifications or changes to our daily routines, the creative way we sometimes must do routine things that before the disability (BD) we took for granted.

It is especially difficult for those of us who must watch someone we love struggle to accept a diagnosis of a debilitating disease such as Alzheimer's disease—and at the same time accept it ourselves so that we can be supportive of them. That's exactly what happened to me in 1996—and the journey that began then still continues today. It went from a trial to a labor of love to a triumphant celebration of my mom's life.

Mom wasn't exactly herself during these days...she was forgetting things that before were critically important details to her that she never overlooked—her kitchen was fastidious, and there was never a dish left in the sink, nor food left out after a meal. I was working in a pretty challenging job that required me to be away from home a lot more than I would have liked, so I only noticed these changes gradually, on those few days when I got to spend three or four of her waking hours with her, rather than coming home after she'd gone to sleep, and leaving before she awakened.

Mom put empty dirty dishes in the refrigerator and put the half-eaten casserole in the dish drainer. She put fried apple pies in the microwave to warm them—and left them in the Styrofoam tray. She hid the mail and swore we didn't get any so I had to go on a scavenger hunt to find the bills in order to pay them and more than once I was late due to never being able to find them.

My mom had always been a “character,” and loved to “cut-up” and have fun, had a ready smile and joke ready to share with anyone, and could not sit still—she always had to be busy. With Alzheimer's, her personality changed and she would often just sit, with her head in her hand, and repeat “I don't want to be like my mama—please God, don't let me be like my mama. When my grandfather died my grandmother, who had just turned 60, “lost her mind,” and became “crazy,” so that none of her children could care for her, so she was admitted to Central State Hospital—then called Milledgeville—the state insane asylum. I now believe she also had Alzheimer's disease. Mom made this statement occasionally before the diagnosis—but after the diagnosis, it became a mantra.

The doctor left it to me to tell her that she had Alzheimer's disease, and she accused me of trying to make her think she was crazy; that it was really me, and not her. I came home one night after a particularly 10-hour day to be locked out

and she refused to let me in because she was waiting for her daughter—me—and was not going to open the door until Kathy got home. I eventually reassured her enough for her to let me use my key to open the door and she let me in. This began the two-to-three-nights-a-week saga of being awakened shortly after I'd get to sleep to be asked where I was. You see, my mom did not remember me as her adult child—only her long-term memory still functioned with regularity, so she remembered me as her 8-year old daughter and she had searched the house to find me and couldn't, and she was in tears. So, at 2:30 in the morning, I'd get up with her, get in the car and proceed to "go find me." You can imagine my mental state at not being recognized by this loving, caring person who had raised me. About this same time, Mom became a client at the Senior Adult Day Center—and the staff there was fantastic. They didn't like changing diapers, dealing with her bossy orders, or redirecting her anger and frustration at no longer being independent—who of us would? But, they loved her, and cared for her, and helped her to retain as much of her independence as possible. Eventually, I could not care for her as well as I wanted to so we moved her to a nursing home for nursing care because her kidneys were not functioning properly, she had difficulty eating, and she needed more care than either the Adult Day Center or I could give her.

Alzheimer's first robbed her of her memories and her ability to learn new things then, it gradually caused her to forget how to do everything that she had ever learned, and her body began to forget how to let her know when she had to go to the bathroom, whether she was thirsty or hungry, hot or cold.

Mom lived with the challenge and courageously daily faced the inevitability of her regressing into long term memory, then losing her ability to form complete sentences. But Mom never forgot love, or a hug, or a smile—and she eventually again remembered that I was Kathy, her daughter.

I've spent most of my career working with individuals with various disabilities and helping them to enjoy life, get creative in approaches to doing daily things, and coping. I've seen a lot of disabilities and have personal involvement within my family with many debilitating diseases. I have never seen anything as completely ravaging as Alzheimer's disease. It is a terminal illness—there is no cure—there is only prolonging the inevitable. Caregivers for individuals with this disease often develop chronic illnesses themselves from the physical and mental stresses of care giving.

In 2001, Mother won her battle with Alzheimer's disease—she died and was perfectly healed—and now her memory is fully restored.

But...there are still 4.5 million Americans, 161,000 Georgians, and 6,400 Cobb Countians diagnosed with Alzheimer's disease.

Early this year, we passed *Mattie's Call* at both the County and the State level. This year, we will host the 4<sup>th</sup> Annual Acworth/Cobb Memory Walk on Saturday, October 7, at Logan Farm Park in Acworth. At this Walk, we will celebrate the lives of those still facing the daily challenge of living with the disease; we will honor and remember those who have won the battle and no longer have to live with the disease. In this continuing way, I honor and remember Mom, and work for those who, like her, contributed to the person that I have become. More importantly, we will have the chance to make Cobb Countians more aware of the disease and its toll, and to work toward our goal of raising \$50,000 for the GA Chapter of the Alzheimer's Association to put right back into Cobb County for the much-needed services to Cobb's residents with the disease and their caregivers—like Senior Services' "Share the Care" program.

**Cobb Senior Services** has a team comprised of 28 staff and their families and two Cobb County Commissioners entered this year; the **Cobb County Senior Citizen's Council** has a team of seniors. Thank you for caring enough to take your commitment to the Seniors in Cobb County just one step further!